

Stronger families, safer communities

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Oregon has recently committed to an exciting new path to improve its public safety system. This path started when the Justice Reinvestment Act, House Bill 3194, was signed into law in 2013. The Justice Reinvestment Act

flatlined prison growth for the next five years and was projected to save the state \$300 million in averted costs of having to open and build new prisons. While so far the act has proven successful, women are now the fastest-growing

segment of our prison population and have been less impacted by the reforms than men.

Women who commit crimes need to be held accountable, and at the same time we need to make sure they return to our communities less likely to commit future crimes. This neglected segment of our criminal justice population is now causing a potential fiscal and safety crisis for the Department of Corrections. Oregon's only women's prison is 75 beds away from its maximum capacity, and corrections officials are having to consider re-opening the minimum security prison to house additional women on the Oregon State Penitentiary grounds — a unit that was closed in 2010.

There are far greater ramifications than the fiscal costs when we send women to prison. Women are often the primary caregivers for their children, and their incarceration can cause damage that lasts generations. Oregon now has an opportunity to pass reforms that would impact parents with custody of their children so that, whenever safely possible, we can build stronger families and safer communities while holding parents accountable.

Washington state implemented an innovative program in 2010 that addressed fiscal concerns about increasing prison costs and worked to reduce risks to children and families. The program, called the Family Offender Sentencing Alternative (FOSA), allows carefully selected parents convicted of non-violent offenses to serve sentences in intensive community supervision rather than in prison. While the program is more expensive than traditional probation (about 25 percent more) it is still one-third the cost of sending a parent to prison. Early analysis of the program indicates that participants are less likely to commit future crimes after completion than if they had not been in the program.

FOSA is a collaboration between the Department of Corrections and the Department of Human Services that focuses on the family as a whole. This alternative not only provides the parents the opportunity to improve their own lives, but the lives of their children and, through those children, the well-being of the community.

Children with a parent who is, or has been, in prison are more likely to face time in prison themselves. Even after a parent's return, these children are much more likely to become involved in the criminal justice system.

In addition to getting pulled into the cycle of crime, children of incarcerated parents face challenges in all other areas of their lives. The departure, and later return, of a parent disrupts children's emotional and educational development. Some studies have even shown that children of incarcerated parents exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder similar to those suffered by children whose parents have died.

The psychological and developmental harm incurred by these children extends years beyond the time their parents are behind bars.

Often, children whose parents are sent to prison do not have family members who can

take them in. With nowhere else to go, these children are placed in foster care. Putting children of incarcerated parents into foster care costs more than taxpayer dollars. Because a move to foster care frequently involves a change in home and school, children lose friends, teachers and previously established support systems. Being abruptly placed in new surroundings is a challenge for any young child. For a child already facing the loss of a parent, however, these changes can be devastating.

Allowing a parent to serve part, or all, of his or her sentence under intensive supervision at home protects children from serious distress. Not only are these children spared the hardship of their parent's absence, but the parents are placed into programs that improve parenting skills and provide them the tools to rebuild their families.

Rep. Jennifer Williamson, D-Portland, is bringing a bill during this legislative session that would allow Oregon to replicate Washington's innovative and successful FOSA program. Choosing to sentence parents convicted of nonviolent crimes and who currently have custody of their children to mandatory supervision with parenting and life skills training is smart public safety policy. By doing so, we can reduce the pressure on the women's prison and avoid the incredibly costly move of opening another prison. Even more importantly, by initiating a program that holds parents accountable, strengthens their parenting skills and keeps them connected to their children, we are investing in these children and giving them greater opportunities to succeed. By keeping families together, Oregon can break the cycle of crime and increase public safety with stronger families and safer communities.

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